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ABSTRACT

Individualized instruction is an old concept that has been newly mandated by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Although neither widely used nor well-defined, individualized instruction is particularly relevant for students who fall outside the norms, behaviorally or academically. It has particular value for ghetto students and delinquent male adolescents. Research indicates that gifted students also benefit from an individualized approach. In most individualized programs, students work at their own paces and pursue objectives based on their unique learning needs. Teachers employ a variety of teaching strategies geared to students' aptitudes and frequently evaluate student progress. Effective leadership from the principal, staff commitment, and upper-level administrative support are identified as keys to success in individualization. Teachers tend to become more effective with individualization over time. Decentralized management and a centralized curriculum also contribute to a successful program. (Author/WD)

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# RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

## Individualized Instruction

Individualized instruction is an old but underutilized teaching philosophy that may suggest some new solutions to the problems of making public education more humane and more efficient. Traditional group-based instruction often tends to neglect the differences among students by treating each child in a classroom identically. As a result, some students are required to work above, or below, their own capacities to keep pace with the group. Individualized instruction addresses this problem by employing a variety of teaching strategies geared to the diverse needs and abilities of the assorted children in each classroom.

Despite its promise, individualized instruction is still neither widely used nor clearly defined. The lack of a generally accepted definition is hardly surprising, since individualization is really more an educational philosophy—a commitment to meeting the needs of each student—than a specific program. In fact, elements of individualized instruction (such as individually assigned grades) are found in even the most traditional program; conversely, no program is completely individualized.

Certain features are common to most individualization efforts. Students work at their own paces, pursuing objectives that reflect their unique learning needs. Teaching methods are geared to each student's individual aptitudes and abilities. Students may work alone or in groups, but either way, they collaborate closely with their instructors and receive frequent feedback about their progress.

Although individualized instruction is still relatively untested, for at least one group of students, the handicapped, it is now required by law. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) mandates that the instructional program for each mentally or physically handicapped child working in a regular class setting must follow an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) tailored to that student's needs. This requirement in effect writes into law the belief that students with special educational needs can benefit from individualized instruction.

This discussion will first consider the types of students individualization can best help. It will also identify factors that influence a program's success or failure before finally discussing some of the implications of these research findings.

## Who Benefits?

An NASSP monograph, *Student Learning Styles*, explores the range of different ways students learn. A collection of essays emphasizes that a variety of environmental, emotional, and physical factors affect a student's ability to learn successfully; an arrangement that is productive for one student may not be for another. As a result, what is needed is "an eclectic instructional program, one based upon a variety of techniques and structures reflecting the different ways that individual students acquire knowledge and skill." This makes it

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essential to identify the types of students who are most or least likely to benefit from individualized approaches.

One chapter of *Student Learning Styles* is devoted to the learning characteristics of gifted students. Evidence shows that such students are generally more persistent, less motivated by teachers, less able to learn by listening, and more interested in working alone than other students. This certainly indicates that gifted students may be among those most able to benefit from individualized instruction.

Other evidence suggests that individualization may also be helpful for children with unusual learning problems. Three studies in particular shed light on this issue.

Aaron and others report on a study of a reading program for behaviorally disturbed adolescent males whose lawbreaking activities had been serious enough to require institutionalization.

One group of students worked in completely individualized programs. Their worksheets specified learning objectives as well as materials and approaches to use in meeting those objectives. These students were actively involved in planning their own study programs and were given continuous feedback about how they were doing. A control group covered the same material, using a more traditional teacher-directed approach, with grades as the main source of feedback.

The authors report some rather dramatic results. Individualized students in the program "read more, learned more, and . . . evidenced a positive change in attitude toward school." They also showed greater gains in reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and total reading, were more favorable toward school work, and were more confident about their own scholastic abilities than were members of the control group.

Kahle and others report on a six weeks' study of an individualized program in a large urban high school. Many of the students were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and thus were more likely than other students to have such educational problems as low verbal skills and irregular school attendance habits.

Experimental students were given audio-tutorial treatments in individualized modes and allowed to work at their own paces and to repeat segments as needed. Members of a control group studied the same material presented in more traditional ways. A series of tests before and after the experiment compared the two groups. The authors found that the self-paced format produced considerably higher student achievement.

A third study, reported by Williamson and Campbell, has a less obvious bearing on the question of who benefits from individualization. This study considered student teachers and how their experiences in ghetto and suburban schools affected their attitudes toward individualized instruction.

The study was divided into two groups. Members of one were "typical" student teachers, taking education classes full-time for one period of eight weeks and teaching full-time in suburban, middle-class schools for the next. A second group worked in inner-city schools for sixteen weeks, studying half-time and teaching half-time for the entire period; members of this group also received special help with problems they encountered during their teaching work.

Before and after the test period, members of both groups were asked about their attitudes toward individualization. The pretest survey showed that both groups were relatively favorable toward individualization. After student teaching, however, subjects who had worked in ghetto schools were more positive about the following practices: individualizing, working with small learning groups, giving differentiated assignments, offering students freedom and responsibility, and employing varied instructional materials.

The authors offer two main explanations for these results. The most obvious explanation—consistent with the preceding studies—is that ghetto students, whose reading levels are often too low to permit them to profit from using standardized materials, benefitted more than other students from individualized instructional approaches. Teachers in these ghetto schools witnessed first-hand the effectiveness of instructional methods geared to the individual needs of their students.

Another factor in shaping the ghetto teachers' attitudes was the extra onsite help they received in the philosophy and practice of individualization. Working closely with professors and receiving special help with problems as they arise are themselves a kind of individualized instruction. Positive experiences with learning in this way may also have played a part in convincing teachers of the value of individualization.

## What Helps It Succeed?

Apart from questions about the best targets for individualization, it is also important to understand what is needed to implement an individualized program successfully. The most substantial study yet made of that subject was undertaken by the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Individualized Schooling. This effort has produced three volumes of analysis; of the three, Daresh's report on environments that facilitate or inhibit individualization is the most relevant for our purposes.

The study on environments covered six senior high schools "diverse in size, location, socioeconomic level, and ethnic composition." The research focused on the kinds of physical and social environments, within and outside a school, that can promote or hinder individualization. Information was collected by means of field study methods such as interviews, observation, and document analysis.

The author cautions that his conclusions are far from definitive. Yet he identifies several keys to successful individualization. These include effective leadership from the principal, staff commitment to the individualization effort, and upper-level administrative support. Among inhibiting factors, lack of community acceptance caused problems for programs in all six schools; however, "the strongest single inhibiting factor was that new teachers were not prepared to work in the programs."

The principal plays a key role in any individualization program, but the nature of that role changes during the program's development. At the beginning, a participative leadership style is more appropriate, since it is crucial to

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involve the school's staff in the planning process. Staff input can provide useful information about how to design an effective program; at the same time, it gives staff members a sense of ownership—and thus a stake in the success—of the program. Since staff commitment is itself an important element in a successful individualization effort, participative planning can be extremely valuable.

Once the program is implemented and becomes part of the school's routine, decision-making responsibility may be less attractive to staff members, particularly if it demands time they cannot spare from teaching. At this stage, the principal should probably take over most of the day-to-day decision-making responsibilities. As the principal moves from a participative to an instrumental leadership style, the need to be supportive—helping and encouraging staff members in every way possible—remains constant.

Inevitably, new teachers will have less understanding of and commitment to a program than those who helped create it. Favorable attitudes toward a program can be developed over time, but, too often, new teachers lack even the basic skills to work with individualization successfully. Daresh suggests that this is the result of teacher training that emphasizes expertise in specific subject areas, while neglecting communication and human relations skills. Because the problem of incoming teachers not fitting into a program is so widespread and can have such serious consequences, school principals should be given an active role in the teacher selection process.

Relevant here is Georgiades's discussion of evidence that a teacher's success with individualization tends to increase over time. Two studies of the implementation of a new program, made four years apart, showed that experience working with the program helped teachers understand it better and implement it more effectively. Some of the problems faced by incoming teachers apparently become less serious as the teachers persist in working with the program.

Another major factor affecting the success of an individualized program, Daresh reports, is administrative support. Policies that promote the hiring and assignment of suitable replacement personnel—principals and teachers alike—are essential.

Several specific administrative arrangements seem to promote successful individualization. Two of the most important are decentralized management, so that each school can allocate its resources to fit its particular needs, and centralized curricula, which provide each school with clearly defined academic objectives.

Visible support from the central office and the school board can also help a program deal with a suspicious or hostile public. Lack of community acceptance of individualization efforts appears to be almost a universal problem. One cause of this may be public mistrust of educational innovations and an accompanying desire to see schools "get back to basics." The administration can counteract mistrust by involving the public in planning the program and by visibly demonstrating that individualization does not mean the breakdown or erosion of school discipline.

Finally, the design of a school building can affect the success of a program; the most suitable buildings are those that include a variety of facilities. Teachers should have common planning areas, rather than isolated offices scattered throughout the school. Open spaces can be helpful, but self-contained classrooms and other individual and small-group learning areas are also needed.

## Implications

These research findings suggest a number of conclusions. The most obvious is that, in the right situation, indi-

vidualized instruction can, indeed, promote more effective learning. Specific evidence suggests that individualization has particular value for students from poor backgrounds and for delinquent male adolescents.

More generally, it appears that students who are not well served by traditional instructional methods are the best candidates for individualized approaches. This is certainly logical; group-oriented instruction is geared to the needs and abilities of "average" students. Others who, because of low verbal skills, frequent absences, behavior problems, or physical or mental handicaps, fall outside the average range are likely to require different approaches. This line of reasoning suggests that PL 94-142's mandate for individualized instruction for the handicapped is, indeed, appropriate. In addition, gifted students, who also fall outside the "average" range, apparently are among those who benefit from individualized instruction.

The research also suggests a number of conclusions about what makes a program successful. The principal plays the key role in any individualization effort. That role, however, is a dynamic one, changing over time from sharing decision-making power in planning the program to assuming unilateral responsibility later on. At any stage of the program's development, the principal should offer staff members support for their efforts to individualize.

Principals may do best when given autonomy in running the school, with a voice in decisions on funding and teacher assignment. When a principal leaves a successful program, finding someone with the knowledge and attitudes to carry on the program must be a high priority.

Replacing teachers often proves to be a problem area. In the long run, teacher training needs to change, becoming more human-relations oriented. Giving student teachers firsthand experience with individualization—as teachers, observers, or students—may also be useful. A more immediate solution to the problem of staffing the program with qualified teachers is an extensive inservice effort to help incoming teachers understand the program and develop the skills to work within it.

Central administrators can help a program by decentralizing school management, establishing well-defined curricular goals, and making appropriate personnel assignments. Visible support for the program can also be helpful, particularly when schools have problems dealing with the public.

In dealing with public misgivings about individualization, schools should enlist parents and other interested community representatives to help plan the program. Efforts to reassure the community that individualization is being managed in a controlled, orderly fashion and is not disrupting school discipline can also pay off.

Because each school, like each student, is unique, with individual problems and possibilities, it is difficult to generalize about the best approach to follow in individualizing. However, any effective program requires careful planning, continuous evaluation, and, above all, a team commitment to developing and implementing a program that will work.

Individualized instruction is not always easy to put into practice, nor is it a cure-all that will help every student. It is, however, a promising solution to the problem of meeting the needs of students who have trouble with traditional education.

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